

## Chapter 15.

At the drawing-room window of the villa there appeared a polite little man, with bright intelligent eyes, and cheerful sociable manners. Neatly dressed in professional black, he stood, self-proclaimed, a prosperous country doctor--successful and popular in a wide circle of patients and friends. As Mrs. Crayford approached him, he stepped out briskly to meet her on the lawn, with both hands extended in courteous and cordial greeting.

"My dear madam, accept my heartfelt congratulations!" cried the doctor. "I have seen the good news in the paper; and I could hardly feel more rejoiced than I do now if I had the honor of knowing Lieutenant Crayford personally. We mean to celebrate the occasion at home. I said to my wife before I came out, 'A bottle of the old Madeira at dinner to-day, mind!--to drink the lieutenant's health; God bless him!' And how is our interesting patient? The news is not altogether what we could wish, so far as she is concerned. I felt a little anxious, to tell you the truth, about the effect of it; and I have paid my visit to-day before my usual time. Not that I take a gloomy view of the news myself. No! There is clearly a doubt about the correctness of the information, so far as Mr. Aldersley is concerned--and that is a point, a great point in Mr. Aldersley's favor. I give him the benefit of the doubt, as the lawyers say. Does Miss Burnham give him the benefit of the doubt too? I hardly dare hope it, I confess."

"Miss Burnham has grieved and alarmed me," Mrs. Crayford answered. "I was just thinking of sending for you when we met here."

With those introductory words, she told the doctor exactly what had happened; repeating not only the conversation of that morning between Clara and herself, but also the words which had fallen from Clara, in the trance of the past night.

The doctor listened attentively. Little by little, its easy smiling composure vanished from his face, as Mrs. Crayford went on, and left him completely transformed into a grave and thoughtful man.

"Let us go and look at her," he said.

He seated himself by Clara's side, and carefully studied her face, with his hand on her pulse. There was no sympathy here between the dreamy mystical temperament of the patient and the downright practical character

of the doctor. Clara secretly disliked her medical attendant. She submitted impatiently to the close investigation of which he made her the object. He questioned her--and she answered irritably. Advancing a step further (the doctor was not easily discouraged) he adverted to the news of the Expedition, and took up the tone of remonstrance which had been already adopted by Mrs. Crayford. Clara declined to discuss the question. She rose with formal politeness, and requested permission to return to the house. The doctor attempted no further resistance. "By all means, Miss Burnham," he answered, resignedly--having first cast a look at Mrs. Crayford which said plainly, "Stay here with me." Clara bowed her acknowledgments in cold silence, and left them together. The doctor's bright eyes followed the girl's wasted, yet still graceful figure as it slowly receded from view, with an expression of grave anxiety which Mrs. Crayford noticed with grave misgiving on her side. He said nothing, until Clara had disappeared under the veranda which ran round the garden-side of the house.

"I think you told me," he began, "that Miss Burnham has neither father nor mother living?"

"Yes. Miss Burnham is an orphan."

"Has she any near relatives?"

"No. You may speak to me as her guardian and her friend. Are you alarmed about her?"

"I am seriously alarmed. It is only two days since I called here last, and I see a marked change in her for the worse--physically and morally, a change for the worse. Don't needlessly alarm yourself! The case is not, I trust, entirely beyond the reach of remedy. The great hope for us is the hope that Mr. Aldersley may still be living. In that event, I should feel no misgivings about the future. Her marriage would make a healthy and a happy woman of her. But as things are, I own I dread that settled conviction in her mind that Mr. Aldersley is dead, and that her own death is soon to follow. In her present state of health this idea (haunting her as it certainly will night and day) will have its influence on her body as well as on her mind. Unless we can check the mischief, her last reserves of strength will give way. If you wish for other advice, by all means send for it. You have my opinion."

"I am quite satisfied with your opinion," Mrs. Crayford replied. "For God's sake, tell me, what can we do?"

"We can try a complete change," said the doctor. "We can remove her at once

from this place."

"She will refuse to leave it," Mrs. Crayford rejoined. "I have more than once proposed a change to her--and she always says No."

The doctor paused for a moment, like a man collecting his thoughts.

"I heard something on my way here," he proceeded, "which suggests to my mind a method of meeting the difficulty that you have just mentioned. Unless I am entirely mistaken, Miss Burnham will not say No to the change that I have in view for her."

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Crayford, eagerly.

"Pardon me if I ask you a question, on my part, before I reply," said the doctor. "Are you fortunate enough to possess any interest at the Admiralty?"

"Certainly. My father is in the Secretary's office; and two of the Lords of the Admiralty are friends of his."

"Excellent! Now I can speak out plainly with little fear of disappointing you. After what I have said, you will agree with me, that the only change in Miss Burnham's life which will be of any use to her is a change that will alter the present tone of her mind on the subject of Mr. Aldersley. Place her in a position to discover--not by reference to her own distempered fancies and visions, but by reference to actual evidence and actual fact--whether Mr. Aldersley is, or is not, a living man; and there will be an end of the hysterical delusions which now threaten to fatally undermine her health. Even taking matters at their worst--even assuming that Mr. Aldersley has died in the Arctic seas--it will be less injurious to her to discover this positively, than to leave her mind to feed on its own morbid superstitions and speculations, for weeks and weeks together, while the next news from the Expedition is on its way to England. In one word, I want you to be in a position, before the week is out, to put Miss Burnham's present conviction to a practical test. Suppose you could say to her, 'We differ, my dear, about Mr. Francis Aldersley. You declare, without the shadow of a reason for it, that he is certainly dead, and, worse still, that he has died by the act of one of his brother officers. I assert, on the authority of the newspaper, that nothing of the sort has happened, and that the chances are all in favor of his being still a living man. What do you say to crossing the Atlantic, and deciding which of us is right--you or I?' Do you think Miss Burnham will say No to that, Mrs. Crayford? If I know anything of human nature, she will seize the opportunity as a means of converting you to a belief in the Second Sight."

"Good Heavens, doctor! do you mean to tell me that we are to go to sea and meet the Arctic Expedition on its way home?"

"Admirably guessed, Mrs. Crayford! That is exactly what I mean."

"But how is it to be done?"

"I will tell you immediately. I mentioned--didn't I?--that I had heard something on my road to this house."

"Yes."

"Well, I met an old friend at my own gate, who walked with me a part of the way here. Last night my friend dined with the admiral at Portsmouth. Among the guests there was a member of the Ministry who had brought the news about the Expedition with him from London. This gentleman told the company there was very little doubt that the Admiralty would immediately send out a steam-vessel, to meet the rescued men on the shores of America, and bring them home. Wait a little, Mrs. Crayford! Nobody knows, as yet, under what rules and regulations the vessel will sail. Under somewhat similar circumstances, privileged people have been received as passengers, or rather as guests, in her majesty's ships--and what has been conceded on former occasions may, by bare possibility, be conceded now. I can say no more. If you are not afraid of the voyage for yourself, I am not afraid of it (nay, I am all in favor of it on medical grounds) for my patient. What do you say? Will you write to your father, and ask him to try what his interest will do with his friends at the Admiralty?"

Mrs. Crayford rose excitedly to her feet.

"Write!" she exclaimed. "I will do better than write. The journey to London is no great matter--and my housekeeper here is to be trusted to take care of Clara in my absence. I will see my father to-night! He shall make good use of his interest at the Admiralty--you may rely on that. Oh, my dear doctor, what a prospect it is! My husband! Clara! What a discovery you have made--what a treasure you are! How can I thank you?"

"Compose yourself, my dear madam. Don't make too sure of success. We may consider Miss Burnham's objections as disposed of beforehand. But suppose the Lords of the Admiralty say No?"

"In that case, I shall be in London, doctor; and I shall go to them myself."

Lords are only men; and men are not in the habit of saying No to me."

So they parted.

In a week from that day, her majesty's ship Amazon sailed for North America. Certain privileged persons, specially interested in the Arctic voyagers, were permitted to occupy the empty state-rooms on board. On the list of these favored guests of the ship were the names of two ladies--Mrs. Crayford and Miss Burnham.

Fifth Scene--The Boat-House.